



COMMAND AUTHORITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Last Updated: 7 January 2020

Clear [command relationships](#) are central to effective operations and organizations. Joint doctrine establishes four command relationships within the operational branch of the chain of command: [combatant command \(command authority\)](#) (COCOM), [operational control](#) (OPCON), [tactical control](#) (TACON), and [support](#). These authorities flow through joint channels, from the Secretary of Defense (SecDef) to the [combatant commanders](#) (CCDRs), to subordinate [joint force commanders](#) (JFCs) if established by the CCDR, and to Service or functional component commanders as delegated by the JFC. The JFC normally delegates appropriate authorities to the various subordinate functional and Service component commanders. The air component commander (usually the functional [joint force air component commander](#) [JFACC]) is normally delegated OPCON over own Service forces and TACON over other joint air forces.

[Administrative control](#) (ADCON) delegated from the Secretary of the Air Force's statutory authorities through the Air Force Service chain, provides the COMAFFOR the necessary authority to ensure that Air Force Service component forces are properly organized, trained and equipped to accomplish those functions and tasks assigned by the JFC. In accordance with Title 10, US Code, [Armed Forces](#), the COMAFFOR's ADCON authority is subject to the operational authority of the combatant commander to whom Air Force forces are assigned or attached.

Two other relationships, [coordinating authority](#) and [direct liaison authorized](#) (DIRLAUTH), are useful for establishing collaborative relationships between organizations.

These authorities are more completely described in [Appendix A](#).

ASSIGNMENT AND ATTACHMENT OF FORCES

Assignment of Forces

Forces are assigned to [combatant commands](#) (CCMDs) by the SecDef's *Forces for Unified Commands* memorandum. Assignment of forces is relatively permanent. A force [assigned](#) to a CCMD may be transferred from that command only as directed by the

SecDef and under procedures prescribed by the SecDef and approved by the President. A CCDR may subsequently organize assigned forces as necessary, to include the establishment of [subordinate unified commands](#) and [joint task forces](#) (JTFs). Establishing authorities for subordinate unified commands and JTFs may direct the assignment or [attachment](#) of their forces to those subordinate commands as appropriate.

Allocation and Attachment of Forces

When a CCDR requires more forces or capabilities than those already assigned, he or she may request additional forces be allocated and attached to that gaining command. Attachment of forces, unlike assignment of forces, is temporary. These forces may be sourced from other CCDRs or Service-retained forces and attached for continuing presence or operations on an annual rotational basis or may be attached for emerging contingencies. Forces allocated and attached for either annual or emergent requirements are identified and transferred in accordance with procedures in the SecDef's *Global Force Management Implementation Guidance* (GFMIG) and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Manual series 3130.06, *Global Force Management Allocation Policies and Procedures*. Annual rotational forces are normally listed in a SecDef deployment order called the *Global Force Management Allocation Plan* (GFMAP). Forces identified for emergent contingencies are detailed in a modification to the GFMAP. The command relationship the gaining commander will exercise over such attached forces (and the losing commander will relinquish) should be specified by the SecDef in an establishing directive. The SecDef will normally attach forces with specification of operational control (OPCON) to the gaining CCDR.

COMMAND RELATIONSHIP MODELS FOR AIR FORCE FORCES

The [deployment order](#) (DEPORD) is the primary instrument for transferring forces and establishing supported and supporting relationships between CCDRs. Forces may also be transferred by an [execute order](#) which executes an approved [operation plan](#). [Other orders](#) created during the planning process, such as warning orders, planning orders, alert order, or fragmentary orders, may also specify or shape command relationships, but they do not transfer forces. The SecDef, as the only authority for transferring forces between CCDRs, normally approves DEPORDs. This DEPORD should specify to which CCDR the deployed forces are assigned or attached and the command relationship (OPCON or TACON) to be exercised by the gaining commander. While the JFC ultimately has the authority to determine the delegation of command among subordinates, Air Force commanders should make consistent recommendations and present forces in a consistent manner to the JFC.

For Air Force forces, there are four general models for command relationships. Considerations for these relationships should include the ability of gaining commands to receive the forces and to command and control them appropriately, the characteristics and support requirements of the forces involved, and the operating locations of the forces.

In-Theater Forces

In general, when Air Force forces deploy into a theater to conduct operations, OPCON of those forces should normally go forward to the CDR to whom the President or SecDef has assigned responsibility for accomplishing the mission. Since not all elements of ADCON authorities and responsibilities are transferred to the forward-based gaining commander, ADCON can and does run concurrently between the gaining COMAFFOR and the parent organizations of the deployed forces. Which elements of ADCON are specified to the forward COMAFFOR and which are retained by the parent organization should be clearly specified.

Out-of-Theater Forces

There are two general cases in which Air Force forces may execute missions inside a theater of operations while based outside the theater. These cases involve forces based in the continental US (CONUS), and forward-based forces operating outside the CONUS (OCONUS) and outside the geographic CDR's [area of responsibility](#) (AOR).

- ★ **CONUS-Based Forces** that launch from their CONUS home station, conduct operations in another theater, and recover in CONUS should normally be transferred with the appropriate command relationship (OPCON or TACON) to the supported CDR at a designated date/time group or geographic point. ADCON should remain with the original Air Force command. CONUS-based forces that do not deploy, but provide support to forward-based operations, normally remain under the OPCON and ADCON authority of their owning command chain and establish support relationships with their forward customers. (Note: see related discussion on reachback and distributed operations in this section.)
- ★ **OCONUS Forces outside the AOR** should be OPCON to the CDR executing the mission, while ADCON is best specified to the COMAFFOR of the AOR in which they bed down. An example of this situation would be bombers stationed at Diego Garcia in the US Indo-Pacific Command AOR, but conducting operations under the command of US Central Command (USCENTCOM). The Commander, USCENTCOM would exercise OPCON and TACON of the bombers through the air component commander to US Air Forces Central. The Commander, Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), would exercise specified elements of ADCON through the established PACAF organizational structure but would have no operational responsibility or authority over the forces attached to Commander, USCENTCOM.

Transient Forces

Per Joint Publication (JP) 1, [Doctrines for the Armed Forces of the United States](#), geographic or local commanders do not normally exercise OPCON of transient forces. However, such forces are subject to local force protection, general orders, dining, lodging, and administrative reporting requirements.

Forces in Exercises

Forces participating in joint exercises under the orders of a CCDR should normally be under the OPCON of the sponsoring CCDR. With the exception of the USNORTHCOM AOR, a geographic CCDR has TACON for exercise purposes for forces conducting exercises within his/her AOR. In this context, TACON provides directive authority over exercising forces for purposes relating to that exercise only; it does not authorize operational employment of those forces.

FUNCTIONAL FORCES

Functional forces satisfy mission requirements across multiple AORs and are thus best centrally controlled by their functional CCDR. For such forces, the functional CCDR frequently retains OPCON of assigned forces and executes as supporting commander to the supported geographic CCDR. In those cases where functional forces bed down in a geographic CCDR's AOR, the Air Force host base commander (or senior Air Force officer present on the installation, if the Air Force is a tenant) normally exercises TACON for force protection and a minimum degree of ADCON for Uniform Code of Military Justice enforcement, dining and lodging, and some limited force reporting. (See the discussion on [ADCON responsibilities of host installation commanders](#) in this annex).

Transfer of Functional Forces to a Geographic Command

In some situations, a geographic commander may request additional functional forces beyond those apportioned or allocated during contingency planning. The decision to transfer functional forces, with specification of OPCON to a geographic CCDR, should be balanced against competing needs across multiple AORs. In some cases, the requirement for OPCON over specific forces to accomplish the geographic CCDR's missions may be of higher priority than the competing worldwide mission requirements of the functional CCDR. Therefore, after coordination with the owning functional commander and upon SecDef approval, functional forces may be transferred to the geographic command and organized accordingly.

The decision to attach additional functional forces has two parts. First, the decision should consider whether:

- ★ The geographic CCDR will use the forces at or near their full capability with little or no residual capability for other global missions.
- ★ The forces will be used regularly and frequently over a period of time, not just for a single mission employment.
- ★ The geographic commander has the ability to effectively [command and control](#) (C2) the forces.

If the answer to all three conditions above is “yes,” then the functional forces should be attached to the geographic CCMD. If any of the above conditions are answered “no,” then the functional forces should remain under the OPCON of the functional CCDR’s air component commander and be tasked in support.

If the decision is to attach forces, the second decision is whether the forces should be attached with specification of either OPCON or TACON.

- ★ **Specification of OPCON:** OPCON “provides authority to organize and employ commands and forces as the commander considers necessary to accomplish assigned missions. It does not include authoritative direction for logistics or matters of administration, discipline, internal organization, or unit training” ([JP 1](#)).

- ★ **Specification of TACON:** TACON is “the authority over forces that is limited to the detailed direction and control of movements or maneuvers within the operational area necessary to accomplish missions or tasks assigned.” [JP 1 states](#) “[w]hen transfer of forces to a joint force will be temporary, the forces will be attached to the gaining command, and JFCs, normally through the Service component commander, will exercise OPCON over the attached forces.” While it is possible for the SecDef to attach forces across CCMD lines with the specification of TACON rather than OPCON, this would deviate from joint doctrine and would result in a chain of command with OPCON and TACON split between two different CCDRs.

REACHBACK AND DISTRIBUTED OPERATIONS

Reachback

[Reachback](#) is defined as “**the process of obtaining products, services, and applications, or forces, or equipment, or material from organizations that are not forward deployed**” (JP 3-30, [Joint Air Operations](#)). Reachback may be provided from a supporting or supported relationship or by Service-retained forces. This relationship gives the air component commander the support necessary to conduct operations while maintaining a smaller deployed footprint.

Distributed Operations

Distributed operations are defined as **operations when independent or interdependent forces, some of which may be outside the joint operations area, participate in the operational planning and/or operational decision-making process to accomplish missions and objectives for commanders.** Forces conducting distributed operations should be assigned or attached to a combatant command. The design of a distributed operation should enable a more survivable C2 network through distribution of tasks, information, and responsibilities. In some instances, the commander may establish a formal supported or supporting relationship

between distributed nodes. In other instances, distributed nodes may have a horizontal relationship. Technology enables more participants from greater distances to create and manage complex networks for distributed operations.

Split Operations

Split operations are **distributed operations conducted by a single C2 entity that is separated between two or more geographic locations**. A single commander should have oversight of all aspects of a split C2 operation. For example, sections of the [air tasking order](#) may be developed from a rear area or backup operation center to reduce the deployed [air operations center](#) (AOC) footprint.

Although distributed and split operations are similar to reachback, there is one major difference. **Reachback provides ongoing [combat support](#) such as products, services, or equipment to the operation from the rear, while a distributed or split operation indicates actual involvement in operational planning or decision-making.**

The decision to establish distributed or split operations invokes several tradeoffs:

- ✦ The fewer personnel or forces deployed forward, the less support is required to be pushed across great distances; however, face-to-face interaction between forward and rear decision makers may be limited, and decision making timelines may stretch.

Remotely Piloted Aircraft and Remote Split Operations

Current remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) technology provides effective employment capabilities as well as unique C2 challenges. One solution is a concept called remote split operations (RSO).

RSO refers to the geographical separation of the RPA from its launch and recovery crew, typically bedded down in a geographic combatant commander's (CCDR) operational area, and from the mission crew, which generally remain in the continental US. This enables the extension of RPA capabilities to almost anywhere in the world through a distributed secure network.

For RSO, the in-theater RPA and launch crew are typically assigned or attached to the CCDR, similar to other in-theater forces. However, the CONUS mission crew and control center may be formally attached to the CCDR based on Secretary of Defense-established global priorities and requirements, and can "swing" to support other CCDRs as those priorities and requirements change. This allows significant flexibility in RPA tasking and support, while allowing these high-demand assets to best meet warfighter needs.

- ✦ Having fewer personnel or forces forward reduces security requirements; however, their expertise is no longer immediately at hand for ad hoc problem solving.
- ✦ Reachback requires more bandwidth for communications. These links may then become [critical vulnerabilities](#). However, a distributed operation may arguably be more survivable and less prone to single-point failure.

MULTINATIONAL OPERATIONS

Multinational operations are operations conducted by forces of two or more nations, and are usually undertaken within the structure of a coalition or alliance.

- ✦ An [alliance](#) is “the relationship that results from a formal agreement [e.g., a treaty] between two or more nations for broad, long-term objectives that further the common interests of the members” (JP 3-0, [Joint Operations](#)).
- ✦ A [coalition](#) is an arrangement between two or more nations for common action. Coalitions are formed by different nations with different objectives, usually for a single occasion or for longer cooperation in a narrow sector of common interest.

Commanders may not have the same defined degree of control over coalition forces as a US-only force; degrees of control may have to be negotiated.

Sometimes, existing non-US controls may be used, as may be encountered in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operations by the use of NATO operational command, OPCON, NATO tactical command, and TACON; commanders and staff should be aware of the different nuances. Finally, each nation may retain its own [chain of command](#) over its forces and its own [rules of engagement](#); thereby further complicating unity of command. Thus, the challenge in multinational operations is the effective integration and synchronization of available capabilities toward the achievement of common objectives through unity of effort despite disparate C2 structures, capabilities, equipment, and procedures.

For additional details and considerations refer to JP 3-16, [Multinational Operations](#)

Multinational and Interagency Coordination

Many operations involve military forces of allies, and many operations also involve intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), [nongovernmental organizations](#) (NGOs), and regional organizations. Direct command over these various entities is frequently not possible, and [unity of effort](#) rather than [unity of command](#) becomes the goal.

[Interagency coordination](#) is “the coordination that occurs between elements of the Department of Defense [DOD], and participating United States Government agencies and departments for the purpose of achieving an objective” (JP 3-0). Attaining national objectives requires the efficient and effective use of the diplomatic, informational,

economic, and military [instruments of national power](#) supported by and coordinated with those of our allies and various IGOs, NGOs, and regional organizations.

- ★ ***“Interagency coordination*** is conducted between elements of DOD and relevant USG departments and agencies to achieve unity of effort. *Interagency coordination links the US military and the other instruments of national power.*

- ★ ***Interorganizational coordination*** refers to broader interaction among elements of the DOD; relevant USG departments and agencies; state, territorial, local, and tribal agencies; foreign military forces and government agencies; international organizations; NGOs; the private sector; and other mission partners.” (JP 3-08, [Interorganizational Cooperation](#))

As with multinational operations, C2 is not as straightforward as within a US-only joint force, and unity of effort is the goal.
